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Schools offer the possibility of providing safe, supportive structures for children whose lives have been marked by chaos. They can enable vulnerable children to develop competencies which can help to protect them from the effects of traumatic backgrounds. When a child's lived experience falls outside the boundaries of normative experience, as in the situation of the maltreated child, schools offer the possibility of an environment in which the child's experiences can be heard and acknowledged. A child's narrative of vulnerability, though, is awkward and painful in both the telling and the listening. Often a complicity of silence exists in the classroom; the child does not tell, and the teacher does not hear. The role of the school in hearing and responding to children's narratives of non-normative lived experience is explored in both fiction and in the real world. Huckleberry Finn is discussed as an American icon of youthful resilience; 2 case studies of vulnerable children are presented which illustrate different ways schools hear and respond to children's narratives. Contains 28 references. (Author/RS)

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Children's narrative and pedagogical attentiveness:

From silence to resilience

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RUNNING HEAD: CHILDREN'S NARRATIVE

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Abstract:

Schools offer the possibility of providing safe, supportive structures for children whose lives have been marked by chaos. They can enable vulnerable children to develop competencies which help to protect them from the effects of traumatic backgrounds (Dante & Cicchetti, 1992; Anthony, 198. ; Farber & Egeland, 1987; Garmezy & Tellegen, 1984). When a child's lived experience falls outside the boundaries of normative experience, as in the situation of the maltreated child, schools offer the possibility of an environment in which the child's experiences can be heard and acknowledged.

A child's narrative of vulnerability, though, is awkward and painful in both the telling and the listening. Often a complicity of silence exists in the classroom; the child does not tell, and the teacher does not hear. The role of the school in hearing and responding to children's narratives of non-normative lived experience will be explored in both fiction and in the real world. Huckleberry Finn will be discussed as an American icon of youthful resilience; two case studies of vulnerable children will be presented which illustrate different ways schools hear and respond to children's narratives.

Introduction:

The experience of being a schoolchild represents one of the basic commonalities of life within this society. There is a solidity to the institution of school, and a sense of permanence and continuity which the word school signifies. For these reasons schools have the capacity to represent safe, supportive structures for children whose lives have been marked by chaos. Within the school setting these children can develop competencies which help to protect them from the effects of neglectful or traumatic backgrounds (Dante & Cicchetti, 1992; Anthony, 1987; Farber and Egeland, 1987; Garmezy & Tellegen, 1984).

Listening to and for the stories of children's lives is a finely tuned teaching art. In order to listen closely to a child, a teacher must suspend his/her preconceived notions about that child's experience. Both teaching and learning are interactive processes; in listening to a child the teacher lends his/her authority to the child's voice, and relinquishes, for the moment at least, his/her position as expert in the classroom.

When a child's lived experience falls outside of the boundaries of normative experience, as in situations of abuse and neglect, it is critical for the child and difficult for the teacher to create and sustain an environment in which the child's needs and experiences can be heard and acknowledged. A child's narrative of vulnerability is awkward and painful in both the telling and the listening. Often, a complicity of silence exists in the classroom; the child does not tell, and the teacher does not hear. This story may be told indirectly through academic failure and personal distress; in order to hear, the teacher must actively seek to discover the sources of the student's distress.

The resilient child, the child who can thrive despite the odds, figures prominently in both the recent professional literature (Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Haan, 1989) as well as within the American literary imagination. An icon of youthful resilience, Huckleberry Finn, will be explored with relevance to childhood vulnerability and the role of the school. The following case studies of vulnerable children: Sammy, an abused and neglected child, and Anna, abandoned at birth and raised for the first year of her life in a foreign orphanage, illustrate the different ways schools hear and respond to children's narratives of non-normative life experience.

Huckleberry Finn goes to school:

It is with a twinge of recognition that the American public sees itself and its children reflected in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn (1884/1986). In 1990 a missing chapter, "Jim and the Dead Man," was found in an attic, and published for the first time in the 1995 summer reading edition of The New Yorker (June 26, 1995). In this chapter, Jim, a runaway slave, hides out with Huck, who has escaped his father, and recounts a fearsome episode from his days as a slave. The tale, framed by the growing friendship and solace the two offer each other, turns on Jim's superstitious beliefs and obeyance to authority. Several weeks later, The New York Times (Rabinovitz, July 25, 1995) followed up with an article in which educators debated the difficulties of teaching this text to high school students. Of particular significance to the debate was the relationship between Huck and Jim within the historical context, i.e. reconstructionist South, in which Twain (i.e. Samuel Clemens) wrote.

Huckleberry Finn has endured as a favorite classic perhaps

because Huck is so recognizable to his audience who see their own childhood selves real or imagined reflected in his dilemmas and exploits. An American hero, Huck embodies independence and defiance, intrinsic qualities central to the American mythos. In Huck these qualities meld together to form a precocious competence in the face of danger.

There is a fascination that the pairing of danger and the resiliency of youth hold for us, perhaps because they speak of hope in our own ability to overcome adversity and to survive tragedy. And Huck is surrounded by life threatening danger: by a father given to besotted, murderous rages, by families bent on archaic vengefulness, and by the racist society in which he is schooled. There is precious little succor that societal institutions can offer Huck; neither family, school, church, nor court can effectively protect him. A true American icon, Huck relies on his own wits alone as he negotiates his way between the two societies of the educated well- to- do and the downtrodden. Chafing against the constraints of "sivilized" society, Huck opts for the open road. Only the runaway slave Jim, unschooled, illiterate, and equally threatened by the society from which he is fleeing, is able to offer Huck understanding, friendship, and connection to others.

For Huckleberry Finn, school is intuitively experienced as disconnected from the experiences and passions of life. It gains in value only when it is forbidden by his father. An uninspired student, Huck struggles through the multiplication table "up to six times seven is thirty five... " (Twain, p.17). His resourcefulness and quick intelligence go unrecognized at school. School, in turn ill prepares him for what he needs to know to survive. Huck seeks insight not from the schoolmarm but from Jim and his divining hairball. Deeply superstitious, Huck is comforted by

his belief in his ability to actively ward off danger. Neither education nor religion can provide him with the knowledge and the protection from harm that he seeks.

Each of the two case studies, "Sammy" and "Anna" presented here exemplifies the different ways in which the narrative of a child's life may be heard and responded to in the classroom. Like Huck, Sammy's story is marked by chaos and trauma, and by the growing realization on the part of the adult world of his vulnerable situation. Unlike Huckleberry Finn, school personnel attempt to provide a responsive school environment for Sammy, but the school is ultimately marginalized by the child welfare agency, and thwarted in this role. The second vignette, "Anna's story" presents a teacher's inability to hear a young child's story of abandonment, and the lost opportunities for both to establish a relationship based on the mutuality of learning and teaching. Both vignettes are explored with regard to their implications for teacher training in the art of listening to the stories that children tell.

Sammy's story:

Sammy, a nine and one half year old boy, was enrolled in the fourth grade in a relatively small, New York City public school. As a young child Sammy was witness to domestic vioence and to familial drug abuse. His previous foster care placement was marked by emotional, physical, and possibly sexual abuse; he currently lived with an aunt.

Sammy's fourth grade teacher, Ms. Marks, described a general picture of poor work habits and inattentiveness in class, which at times left her feeling exasperated. He responded quickly to counseling and to his

teacher's increased interest in him with improved motivation and academic functioning. He was both pleased with his progress as well as anxious about meeting his teacher's demands and retaining her favorable impression of him.

Sammy's home situation though soon unraveled, his school performance suffered; and he became unresponsive in class. He became increasingly attached to his teacher, who both continued to demand strong academic performance and to create opportunities for him to spend time with her. Fragments of information that he revealed led her to suspect that his capacity to cope was nearly overwhelmed. Sammy's mood became increasingly dejected and angry; he was distractible in class, defiant and provocative.

Ms. Marks felt frustrated; the academic and social gains he had made in her class were rapidly fading, and she, in turn, was finding herself becoming increasingly angry with Sammy. She was troubled by Sammy's behavior and by her own reaction, both of which she viewed as personal failures. In counseling, Sammy admitted to deliberately provoking her anger, and added, "So she'll know how it feels to be angry inside." Sammy had evoked in Ms. Marks a truly empathic response; the anger she felt was but a shadow of the anger Sammy carried within. Her feelings of frustration and anger were not emblematic of professional failure, but reflected, rather, Sammy's own anger, frustration, and worry.

Sammy was removed from school one afternoon by his caseworker, and another odyssey into New York City's foster care system began for him. About eight weeks later, Sammy was permanently placed with his father, despite the father's past record of abuse and Sammy's obvious fear of him.

Requests by the school counselor, teacher and principal that Sammy be permitted to continue to attend that school were denied, and Sammy was transferred to a school of his father's choice.

The meaning of school for Sammy:

Like Huckleberry Finn, Sammy's life experiences aged him, and he felt older than his years, "...like an adult" (sic.). At nine years of age, he spoke fluently of betrayal: "...they always say, 'Trust me. Trust me - you can trust me' ...even my family - they've betrayed me...I would never betray anyone in my family." Commenting on his multiple foster placements: "You know what it's like? It feels like they're playing a game - throwing a ball from one to the other - except that I'm the ball. I'm the one who's getting thrown from one to the other." With virtually no control over his life circumstances, school became a place where Sammy's voice could be heard.

School is often conceptualized as an extension of the home, a setting where the growth and development of children may be carefully nurtured. For Sammy, though, school was not an extension of the home, but rather a a psychological home in which he felt protected and cared for. Removed from his grandmother's home and from school, Sammy spoke longingly of his teacher, Ms. Marks. By telephone he dictated a message to her: "I even miss your yelling...you're like a mother to me." Ms. Marks wondered whether she had been unkind in demanding that Sammy work hard in her class, yet achievement was especially meaningful for Sammy within the context of the lack of control he had in other areas of his life.

School provided opportunities for Sammy to have experiences common to children of his age, and to develop a language of childhood.

Sammy experienced himself as damaged as a result of his experiences of betrayal by his family and in response to the abuse he had suffered. He was envious of those he viewed as intact, i.e. those who "weren't experimented on." A child, such as himself, he reasoned, "experimented on" by his parents in an attempt to "make him stronger...because he used to be a little infant and weak" subsequently "doesn't know how to think... "

Sammy, though, often pointed to his own achievement in school to demonstrate his good thinking capacity. Unlike Huckleberry Finn, who never mastered the multiplication tables, ability to perform simple arithmetic functions provided concrete proof for Sammy of his fundamental intactness, as represented by "smart(ness)." Intellectual ability is viewed by many as having protective effects against stress (Kandel et al., 1988, Masten et al., 1988, Garmezy, et al., 1984, Werner & Smith, 1982). Luthar and Zigler (1991) argue, though, that when stress levels are high, intelligent children seem to lose their advantage, and demonstrate competence levels closer to those of their less intellectually able peers.

Sammy's academic achievement suffered accordingly as his life circumstances, a significant source of stress, became increasingly unstable. Achievement, for example, as measured by standardized tests ranged from the 35th to the 97th percentile in the course of less than one year. During periods of relative calm Sammy progressed rapidly; his self percept as "smart" was a buffer for his feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness to control his own fate. Huck Finn had recourse to his own resourcefulness and to a cultural tradition of superstition; Sammy's sole recourse, ultimately, was to rely on his own wits. His teacher's doubts as to whether she should have pressed him to achieve on a level commensurate with his classmates,

may be reassessed in light of the meaning of achievement for Sammy.

Achievement and confidence in his cleverness clearly helped Sammy to face his traumatic past and uncertain future. School, including attachment to a supportive, yet demanding teacher represented an avenue of growth for Sammy. Competence in school is considered by many to be a necessary factor in the development of resiliency in vulnerable children (Garmezy, 1984; Masters, & Tellegen, 1984, Block & Block, 1980; Anthony, 1974; Anthony, 1987). Maltreated children's relationships with their teachers can even serve a protective function with regard to the negative outcomes associated with abuse (Lynch & Cichetti, 1992; Rutter, M., 1990; Farber & Egeland, 1987). The experience of school helped to ground Sammy within some of the normative experiences of childhood. For Sammy, regular school attendance became symbolic of 'normality,' as contrasted with the discontinuities of his out-of-school experiences.

School personnel demonstrated willingness to hear Sammy's narrative of trauma and dislocation, and to provide a supportive structure for him, even within the framework of a traditional classroom setting. School as a place where one will be heard is especially meaningful for children with histories of abuse and/or neglect. Haan (1989) differentiated between the resilient and the vulnerable child on the basis of the child's ability to be heard. Resilient children are optimistic that they will be heard and be able to protect their legitimate self-interests, while vulnerable children expect to be ignored or used. Sammy's bitterness at the repeated "betrayal(s)" he experienced suggests his vulnerability in the face of his powerlessness to prevent a return to the foster care system.

Sammy's powerlessness was mirrored by the school's

powerlessness to effect any influence upon the child welfare agency. This agency operated as a closed system, impervious to the influences of other institutions, such as schools, on the lives of the children in their care. As in the story of Huckleberry Finn, the court system failed to effectively protect Sammy, returning him to the same situation which had injured him in the past. An opportunity was lost for Sammy, at an especially vulnerable point in his life, to be able to negotiate his out-of-school experience within the boundaries of the familiar and welcoming schoolhouse door.

The second vignette presented offers a brief glimpse into the ways in which a young girl, Anna, attempts to make sense of her early experiences of abandonment. Here, the child urgently seeks to communicate her personal narrative, but the telling of her story is not sanctioned by the teacher. Anna's narrative is considered extra-curricular, outside of the boundaries of classroom discourse.

Anna's story:

Anna was born in Nicaragua, and was adopted and brought to New York by her (adoptive) parents, the Greens, when she was little over one year old. She was raised from birth in an orphanage; her birth history was unknown. The room in which Anna lived at the orphanage was filled with metal cribs from which the babies were only infrequently lifted by nursing attendants. Medical care was minimal, and all the children suffered from perennial upper respiratory infections.

Ms. Green soon became a constant presence in Anna's life, and both she and the other children soon eagerly awaited Ms. Green's arrival each day. Six months later, at the conclusion of the lengthy adoption

process, Ms. Green returned home to New York with Anna. Anna adjusted rapidly to her new surrounds, and quickly became attached to her parents and to her maternal grandmother who lived with the family. From an early age Anna was told about the adoption, and would frequently ask her mother to tell her, again, the story of how she came to New York. For Anna, the story was bittersweet; reassured by her parents' care and love, she did not miss the implications of her abandonment by her birth mother. She spoke often about the adoption, and pointed to her own complexion, which was considerably darker than that of her adoptive family. Anna began to refer to her birth mother as her "brown mommy ," while reserving "mommy" for her adoptive mother.

Anna and her story go to school:

By the time she began a preschool program at age four , Anna was a talkative and lively child, comfortable with and demanding of the attention of adults. Anna loved to listen to stories, and to talk about her own life; she was one of the first to join her teacher and classmates at "circle time," and was an animated participant in the group's discussions. The story which occupied her thoughts, though, was not a socially sanctioned story "appropriate" for group discussion. While the other children shared stories of trips to the mall, Anna wanted to talk about her "brown mommy."

Anna's teacher, Ms. Links, tried gently to steer the conversation away from material she viewed as potentially disturbing for the other children, suggesting, rather that Anna tell about her walk to school that morning with her "mommy." With dogged determination Anna returned to her story whenever the opportunity presented itself. The time, though, was

never opportune, and Anna's remarks were dismissed as extraneous to the conversation, i.e. not "on task." Anna complained often to her mother that her teacher "hates me... she wouldn't let me talk, wouldn't let me say... ."

The situation reached a head for both child and teacher around winter holiday time, when the class' circle time discussions focused on holiday celebrations. Anna took great interest in the manger scenes which began to appear in the small front gardens of many of her neighbors' homes, and became fascinated with the story of the birth of Jesus. She seemed drawn to the Christmas story not for its overtly religious content, but as a story of maternal love and devotion. At home, Anna returned to this story, remarking to her mother, " Mary would never have given up baby Jesus," an obvious reference to her own early abandonment.

On several occasions Anna attempted to tell her teacher about the personal meaning this story held for her. Ms. Links, though, quickly redirected the conversation to more neutral ground. The teacher's rejection of her story was experienced by Anna as a personal rejection of herself. Several years later Anna continued to revisit this early experience, recalling her hurt and anger: "I was so mad, so angry with her - she didn't listen."

Ms. Links, though, was neither inexperienced nor insensitive to Anna's needs. While sympathetic to Anna's situation, she objected to permitting her to give voice to her story on pedagogic grounds. "Circle - time" meetings were always on-task, and she skillfully redirected the children's remarks so that the discussion followed a curricular theme. Sanctioning the telling of Anna's story would have meant interrupting the planned curricular event, and stretching the boundaries of what it is that

children learn in school. And Anna's story was truly extra-curricular, coming from an experiential world far removed from the school context.

The failure to hear is grounded on teacher judgment as to what constitutes curriculum, or what gets talked about in the classroom. From the teacher's perspective, permitting Anna's story to be told in the classroom would have represented an unsanctioned blurring of the boundaries between home and school. Anna's story could potentially open doors to two unsanctioned curricular events: introduction of potentially "upsetting" material, re. non-normative experience, i.e. "two mommies," as well as providing an opening for the child's experience and expression of religion. In this classroom moment, these two powerful, emotionally laden events coincided temporally and thematically.

Talk about mothers and about religion falls clearly within the domain of home. Grumet (1988) speaks to the passing of "sleep-creased and milk-moustached" (p. 164) children from the doors of home through the doors of public institutions, i.e. schools. The teacher's reluctance to permit the intimacy of home talk in the classroom reflects, perhaps, her caution to stay within those boundaries that Grumet describes as demarcating the areas of influence which protect "the child, the teacher, the parent, the state from each other's influence (p. 170). Yet these boundaries are the same borders which separate parents from schools, and preserve a school culture apart from and alien to the culture of home.

The language of classroom discourse is qualitatively different from the language of home. In Anna's classroom the sanctioned conversation was eventful in nature, referring to a narration of events untouched by powerful, complicated emotions. The language of home, by contrast, is

more welcoming of the added layer of emotionally meaningful content: In this classroom moment, home and school were dichotomously represented, with the discourse of home isolated from that of school. Embedded within this discursive frame are questions as to the place of a child's narrative of lived experience in the classroom, and also whether only neutral, episodic rendering of experience is "appropriate" to classroom discourse.

Reconceptualizing the act of teaching

For Huck, education in the weightiest moral and ethical dilemmas of the time takes place far from the frame of the schoolhouse door. Generations of irreverent schoolchildren concur: book learning takes place apart from some of the most moving and meaningful of human experiences. The term itself: 'schoolchildren' suggests a different child from the outside-of-school-child. One has only to witness the instantaneous surge of energy as droopy lidded children revive as they burst through the school doors at the end of the day.

"Boring" crops up again and again when children talk about school. A sense of ennui pervades: a feeling of being disconnected from the enterprise of school, and of teachers as only vaguely connected to the lives of the children they teach. Teachers too, speak of boredom in the classroom, their own and that of their students. Sarason, in his seminal work, The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change (1982) addresses teacher boredom, and the ways in which routinized, predictable experiences *for the teacher* have a deadening effect over time. This factor, Sarason argues, together with the inherent disparity between giving and getting in teaching, result in a a self protective move to develop routines

which reduce the demand on the teacher to give.

As in Huck Finn's day, schools resist the call to hear the stories of individual lives in the classroom. Teachers fear opening up a Pandora's box of dangerous material if unsanctioned topics are introduced into classroom discourse. They fear, too, that if they 'know' their children's lives too well, especially those marked by pain, they will lose the ability to teach, to maintain a focus on the curricular demands of school. In avoiding this forbidden knowledge, though, they mirror the disconnectedness from lived experience that many children experience as they cross the classroom threshold.

Teachers speak of the sadness of some of their young students' "fractured childhoods" (Hewlett, 1991), their voices echoing the hopelessness they hear in their students' stories. Many seem to absorb this aura of hopelessness which they feel surrounds a child's life, and speak of the insignificance of their contribution in light of their young students' chaotic life outside of the school doors. Ironically, the loss of the listener who turns away, overcome by this contagious sense of hopelessness, recreates the child's earlier experience of disillusionment with the adult world.

Van Manen (1991) raises the question as to what teachers are to make of the unhappy life stories of children. He defines a critical feature of teaching as the understanding of a child's learning within the context of the larger personal history of the child. Pedagogical action may be determined by what we know of the larger context in which children live. While he warns against naivete and ethnocentricity on the part of educators in assuming that we know what is best for (other people's) children, Van Manen

addresses the issue of pedagogical responsibility when confronted by children in predicaments over which they have no control and which do not support their growth.

When asked to reflect upon what brought them into teaching, few teachers, recall a particular instructional method. Rather, powerful memories of teachers: inspirational, sensitive, and nurturing surface. Sometimes, a cutting teacher is recalled, and the student resolves to be a different kind of teacher. Or, there is another, beloved teacher, a foil to the despised teacher, whose care contrasts with the harshness of the latter. Those teachers who are recollected, whose impressions have been carefully gathered and continue to powerfully influence long after the blackboard has been wiped clean, are those who understood this long ago child. These are teachers who recognized her strengths, acknowledged her vulnerabilities, and who reflected a confidence in her abilities to grow and develop. The role of the teacher as an important attachment figure for children is increasingly being examined as a salient factor in children's academic achievement and emotional well being (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Sroufe, 1989).

There is a poignant dilemma here: the desire to make a difference in the lives of children is a powerful motivator in the decision to enter teaching, and yet the reluctance to 'know' the lives of their children, and to permit this knowledge a place in the classroom. This dilemma suggests that there is a need to rethink how we define the art of teaching, and that we consider how teachers may become facilitators of children's stories and viewpoints. Polakow (1982) calls upon Gadamer's notion of "fusion of horizons" in describing how the child's life world is understood as a dialectical interplay

between child and adult. It is within this delicate space between the lives of the children, and the person and the position of the teacher that we may carve out an ethos of teaching within which the tales and inchoate experiences of children may be voiced.

Conclusion:

School represents a place somewhere between home and the wider world, where children learn to forge connections between their experiences in ways that hold both private and public meanings. The teacher is a critical figure in this process, typically representing for children the first major, other-than-family societal institution with which they come into contact. The school, in the person of the teacher, helps children bridge the intensely familiar and highly personalized world of home with the shared world of complex social relationships.

An opportunity was unwittingly missed for Anna to begin to connect her two worlds of experience, home and school. Sharing her narrative of loss and of being found and cherished, could have communicated to Anna and to her peers that the group or "institutional" setting does not demand that expressions of uniqueness be silenced. The situation was made all the more poignant as the orphanage, and not the school was the first institution with which Anna interacted, and where her individuality truly had little bearing on the care she received. Recently, writers have called for greater sensitivity in listening to children's narratives (Brown & Gilligan, 1991) and in considering the integrative function of the act of constructing and narrating stories of one's life (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988).

The act of listening to children's narratives is as complex and as

conflicted as the telling. Anna's teacher, for example, was unable to carve out a space within the classroom conversation for her narrative to unfold. Her lack of response itself signaled a response, communicating a clear message to the young children in her charge that affectively laden communication is the province of home and not school. Here, censorship of the child narrative implies that the culture of the school calls for clear demarcation between the realms of the affective and the cognitive, despite the impact of one upon the other, as demonstrated by Sammy's erratic academic performance.

Like the fictional Huckleberry Finn, Sammy's early experiences taught him that societal institutions such as family and court are unresponsive to his individual needs. Sammy's needs were sorely neglected by his family, while the judicial system viewed him as "one of three," i.e. one of the three siblings in the family "case" whose welfare was determined in tandem. The school might have played an on-going role in nurturing Sammy and in helping him to negotiate life within a larger society of peers and adults. Unfortunately, the institution empowered with Sammy's welfare failed to recognize the school as an important resource for maltreated children. Such narrowly circumscribed roles deprive children most in need of the means to negotiate the distance between private experiential worlds and full and comfortable membership in wider social settings.

School has the potential to become a stabilizing force in the lives of children who have experienced abandonment, abuse, and neglect, and whose narratives express betrayal and loss. The child begins to integrate lived experience as he/she negotiates this space between the intimacy of

the home and the more public space of school. The chapters written by school experience have powerful ability to shape the child's developing narrative with which he/she arrives at the schoolhouse door. In sanctioning the telling of their stories in school, teachers facilitate the child's ability to integrate the two different traditions of discourse of home and school, and provide a space within which this may occur.

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